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# Saving the Arcade Isn't Easy, but It's Worth All the Trouble

Chester Smolski

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# Saving the Arcade isn't easy, but it's worth all the trouble

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**Chester Smolski**

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The word tradition, when associated with an historic Providence, conveys a feeling of continuity and sensitivity to the past. To return to one's community after an extended absence and find the same drugstore, record shop and bank in the same location of familiar old buildings is somehow reassuring. Hometown signifies unchanging, comfortable and memories.

Comforting as is this link with the past, one needs to recognize that change is also with us, a natural consequence of growth and development. Change is of the future while tradition is of the past, and when they meet they can generate conflict.

Familiar, traditional and the past on the one hand and change, unknown and the future on the other. It is this meeting of tradition and change which faces the merchants occupying the Arcade in Providence's financial district and who face some difficult decisions on their future. Their dilemma is compounded due to their location in one of the city's most notable buildings, a building about to undergo extensive renovations.

The Arcade is America's first shopping mall and one of the three best examples of 19th century commercial architecture in this nation. It is also badly in need of repair. Authorities say that without major renovations over the next few years it will be faced with condemnation. The Rhode Island Association for the Blind, current owner, does not have funds necessary to make these changes by itself. Thus, it was welcomed news when the locally-based national firm of Gilbane Building announced they were taking over the property. The arrangement is a 28-year lease with three additional 10-year options, at which time the property will revert back to the association.

Not only will the \$2.5-million renovation bring the building back to its former elegance, but the intent is to make this shopping arcade a magnet for the downtown, a shopping experience that will attract the downtown worker and some of the more than 900,000 persons comprising the Providence metropolitan area. To this end Gilbane is now in partnership with the firm responsible for the development and leasing of the North Market at Boston's Faneuil Hall Marketplace.

To ensure that the building's architectural integrity is maintained, \$100,000 of city community development funds and

\$50,000 from the Rhode Island Historical Preservation Commission have been allocated to the project, thus giving city and state control over all exterior work on the building.

The major changes planned for the inside of the building require that the building close down from January to September, which closing will cause the relocation of 20 retailers and various offices. This eight-month closing will hurt both tenant and developer alike. The cost of a move, the loss of business and the disruption could easily put some retailers out of business, and the developer will lose rental income for this period. To lessen the impact of the closing, the mayor, at a recent meeting of the parties involved, pledged city help and the assignment of a staff member to work with the merchants on this problem.

As a private development there is no direct financial aid for helping tenants to move. And when they return, they will find that rents will have been raised appreciably; so much, in fact, that some will not be able to return. Around this one latter point came the feeling about these small shopkeepers that is perhaps indicative of many of our downtown merchants. Frequently referring to "the way it was" and "the way it is," none of these merchants talked about "the way it will be" and the opportunities, points emphasized by the developer and mayor alike.

Traditional ways for a small shopkeeper have meant operating without a lease, paying fixed rents that are as much as \$10 per square foot below market rates, and not fully capitalizing on the unique Arcade location. The jump into a new merchandising concept with leased arrangements, rents based on gross income and with a percent of income for promotion can represent a major adjustment. This change will be difficult and, for some, impossible. To move out, to move back, to incorporate new merchandising methods and to be 60 years old may be just too much.

It will not be easy for the Arcade merchants, many of whom have been at that location for years and who have stayed through difficult times, but this development offers both them and prospective new shopkeepers exciting changes for the future. And that is where we should be looking and thinking for a revitalized downtown and city.

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*Chester E. Smolski is director of urban studies, Rhode Island College.*